

Engaged Academic Literacy for All

Usually, in a regular history class, the teacher would say, “Read from page so-and-so to so-and-so, answer the red-square questions and the unit questions, and turn them in.” And it wasn’t like you had to *read* it. . . If the red-square question was here, you knew the answer was somewhere around that area right there. It was something that you could like slide by without them knowing. I don’t know if they cared or not, but that’s the way everybody did it.

—Rosa, grade 9 student

Most teachers, if I talk to them, they’ll be like, “What, are you serious—this is college, you’re asking me how to *read*? I can’t help you. You should have learned that in eighth grade.”

—Kalif, community college student¹

AS A NATION and as educators, what do we expect of our middle school, high school, and college students? What messages do we send students about their academic abilities and promise? If we believe that all students should be able to think and read critically, to write and talk knowledgeably about historical, literary, scientific, or mathematical questions, we need to provide richer learning opportunities than the “red-square question” routine that Rosa describes. We need to better prepare and support students like Kalif.

This book presents an approach to improving students’ ability to read critically and to write about and discuss texts in a range of disciplines—an approach that builds their academic literacy. The framework for this approach, Reading Apprenticeship, starts from the premise that engaging students like Rosa and her peers affectively as well as intellectually is key to developing the dispositions and skills required for becoming confident, critical, and independent readers and thinkers.

Like Kalif, many students feel overwhelmed by the high level of literacy expected of them in college courses. Standards for high-level literacy, such as those embodied in the Common Core State Standards for K–12 students or in

the “gatekeeper” exams that determine college admission and placement, outpace many students’ preparation. Teachers feel similarly overwhelmed by the distance between these ambitious literacy goals and their students’ experience engaging with academic texts. When students are unaccustomed to carrying out rigorous literacy tasks, it is a daunting prospect for teachers to find new ways to engage them in the satisfaction of unlocking texts and the learning it makes possible.

Many educators express the belief that students who struggle with academic texts “just aren’t motivated.” Yet we see ample evidence that by helping students find their own reasons and entry points for reading challenging texts, we can support them in developing both their affective and their intellectual engagement with academic texts. When a teacher at a high-poverty high school with a majority of English learners tells us her students are “suddenly finding that the economics textbook is more interesting,” and they are eager to read and discuss the ideas in it, it seems clear that the students rather than the text have changed. By learning to work through challenging passages and to collaboratively make sense of them, these students have developed a different *affective* relationship with the text and with economics concepts they previously found “unengaging.”

Our work over the years with thousands of middle school, high school, college, and pre-service teachers has been the subject of multiple research studies demonstrating that teachers can successfully apprentice their students into becoming readers of academic texts. When teachers listen closely to students’ thinking, probe their thinking respectfully, and help students listen to and probe each other’s thinking about texts, classrooms can become lively centers of discussion about *how*, as well as what, students are reading. In such classrooms, students begin to see themselves differently and to feel more empowered as readers and thinkers. Time and again, this change in students’ sense of themselves as readers and learners—their academic and reader identity—results in striking changes in how they engage and comprehend a wide range of academic texts.

What we have learned from teachers and students is consonant with a deep reservoir of knowledge developed by scholars in the areas of cognitive science and sociocultural learning theory; psychological research on motivation, engagement, achievement, and identity; and educational research on pedagogy and disciplinary literacy in core subject areas.

The Reading Apprenticeship instructional framework presented in this book combines this scholarly research with practitioner experience. This framework, described in Chapter Two, is not a program or a curriculum that teachers or schools “adopt.” It is an organizing paradigm for subject area teaching, one

that enables students to approach challenging academic texts more strategically, confidently, and successfully.

The Context for Change

Reading, and its role in promoting achievement, is fundamentally an equity issue.

—William Loyd, district literacy coordinator,
addressing superintendents of the
Washtenaw, Michigan, intermediate school district

Secondary and post-secondary education in the United States reflects a society that does not equitably educate people living in poverty, members of racial and ethnic minorities, those whose first language is not English, and those whose learning differences call for special education services. Problems of inequitable opportunity and outcomes do not originate in schools and cannot be addressed through schooling alone. However, strong evidence suggests that schools can either reinforce these inequities or, like the schools in the Washtenaw district and others, push against them.² The following look at the state of literacy in secondary school, college, and beyond makes clear the extent of the problem.

Literacy in Middle and High School

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), two-thirds of U.S. high school students are unable to read and comprehend complex academic materials, think critically about texts, synthesize information from multiple sources, or communicate clearly what they have learned. Only a small minority of eighth and twelfth graders read at an advanced level. Many high-needs students have been demoralized by years of academic failure and do not see themselves as readers or as capable learners. Achievement gaps are stubbornly persistent along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. By some estimates, half of the incoming ninth graders in a typical high-poverty urban high school read two or three years below grade level.³

The traditional response to low literacy achievement has been to take a remedial approach to addressing skill deficits. At the middle and high school levels, low-achieving students are often required to take several remedial classes a day. Yet research has shown that isolated, skills-based instruction in reading may perpetuate low literacy achievement rather than accelerate literacy growth.⁴ At the same time, a renewed policy focus on “college and career readiness” driven by concerns about global competitiveness has highlighted the importance of increasing the number of students who can read critically and make sense of complex texts.